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ATTITUDES OF THE MUSLIM WORLD TO SOVIET MUSLIMS

STATEMENT BY SALEM AZZAM, SECRETARY GENERAL, ISLAMIC COUNCIL

The Soviet Union has one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. In recent years the Soviet Muslims have begun to attract attention from a number of quarters, for the political, economic and strategic importance of these people is becoming increasingly clear. They represent a 'card' of great value, that can be used by any of the participants in our modern version of Kipling's 'great game'. But inevitably, the question of the Soviet Muslims is one that must concern most immediately and most deeply the world-wide community of Muslims, for they are involved not merely through political expediency, but because of a shared bond of belief. And yet, the response of the Muslim nations to the plight of their brothers in religion in the Soviet Union has to date been fragmentary, uncoordinated and tentative. The reasons for this are varied.

Labels are a useful shorthand, but the danger is that when used too freely, they lead to oversimplification, which obscures rather than clarifies. One speaks of the 'Soviet Muslims' as though they had a corporate identity, but they do not: they are a disparate group of people bound together only by a common faith. They include representatives of ancient settled communities, nomadic tribes, isolated mountain-dwellers and comparatively new immigrants. Ethnically, too, they show great diversity: there are Turkic peoples, Iranians, Caucasians, Chinese, Mongols and even Arabs. Thus there is

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no blood bond between them, no common language. This is accentuated by the fact that geographically they are scattered over a wide area, with concentrations of Muslims in places as far apart as Siberia, Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Volga. Even their experience of Islam differs widely: the forebears of some of the Soviet Muslims were amongst the earliest converts to Islam, embracing the Faith in the 7th to 8th centuries; others were converted by the Ottomans in the 16th century, some by the Safavids; yet others became Muslims as late as the 19th century. They represent different trends of Islamic thought: Sunnis of the Hanafi and Shafi'i schools, Shi'a of the ithna 'ashariyya and the Nizari Isma 'iliyya, extreme sects such as the 'Ali ilahi and the Ahl-i Haqq, Sufi orders. The Muslim community of the Soviet Union is indeed a microcosm of the whole Islamic world.

This very diversity, so unique in its richness, has been a factor in the apparent neglect shown by Muslim countries towards Soviet Muslims. The largest Muslim states today are Indonesia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh, Turkey and Iran. Only Iran has any blood link with the Soviet Muslims and that is provided by the Azerbaidzhanis, who are themselves a minority in Iran, and, moreover, a volatile minority of often uncertain allegiance. After Enver Pasha's ill-fated attempts to raise the flag of Pan-Turkism in Central Asia, Turkey has been extremely cautious in its attitude towards the Turkic peoples of the Soviet Union. The others, Indonesia, Nigeria,

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Pakistan and Bangladesh, have no ethnic links at all. As for specific doctrinal links, it is true the traditions or schools followed by Soviet Muslims have their counterparts in the world outside. Thus, the majority of Iranians are Shi'a, as are the majority of Soviet Azerbaidzhanis; the Turks and the Pakistanis are Hanafi Sunnis, as are the Soviet Central Asian Muslims. However, these doctrinal differences must be seen in perspective: they are neither as binding nor as divisive as, for example, those between Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians. On a religious level, a reformer such as the Ayatollah Khomeini is likely to have as many admirers and followers amongst the Sunnis as he is amongst the Shi'a. The rifts in the Islamic world today are not in any way attributable to differences in the interpretation of the Koran or the succession of the Imams: they are political and in essence, the legacy of colonial rule, which, imposing artificial barriers, sought to strengthen its rule by atomizing the area under its control. It is interesting to note that the Russians followed precisely the same policy in Central Asia in 1924, when they created so-called national states, in a region that had from antiquity been multi-racial. The fates of the Fertile Crescent and Central Asia are different only in that colonial rule has continued in one area and has been overthrown in the other.

Today the Muslim world is bedevilled by economic problems on the one hand and underdeveloped political sophistication on the other. Most Muslim states are poor; they need aid. The Soviet Union has known how to exploit this situation. Nearly all the Muslim states are

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receiving [redacted] skilled technical help from the Russians. Many are also receiving military support. They have become deeply embroiled with the Soviet Union, before realising, as Afghanistan did to her cost, that there is a price to be paid. Imperceptibly, they have been caught in a web of commercial treaties. Cultural agreements have provided educational facilities, that appear all the more attractive as Western universities put themselves beyond the purse of the Third World. Books, films, visiting scholars and artists paint a glowing picture of Soviet reality. Pressure is easily brought to bear on these countries. If more forceful persuasion is needed, Soviet vassals such as Cuba spell out the message with less equivocation. Furthermore, there are powerful Communist parties in many Islamic countries and their influence cannot be ignored. For the majority of Muslim countries, however, their relationship with the USSR is one of extreme delicacy and they are in no position to voice protests to the Soviet government.

I have spoken of the lack of ethnic links between the great majority of Soviet Muslims and the other Muslim peoples; also of the internal and external problems of the Muslim countries, which govern their contacts with the Soviet Union. There is a third and equally important factor: ignorance. The Muslim world as yet knows almost nothing about the Soviet Muslims. This is after all not so surprising. Adherents of Islam are found in all parts of the world and, without special reason, no one group is likely to impinge on the consciousness of the community as a whole. The Christians have a clerical hierarchy that formally unites Christian communities in different countries; the Jews have a strong ethnic bond to underline their religious

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affiliation. The Muslims have neither. This was not always so: in the time of the Caliphate the Muslims did have a central, supra- national point of focus. Now the Muslim world is fragmented by political divisions and the sense of community, such a vital part of Islam, is experienced only intuitively by people as individuals, not by states as a whole. In other words, the awareness of Islamic unity is more apparent at the grass-root level than at the obvious official level, though even here it has never died: typically, in the 1930s, when the Muslim Tatars of Poland needed help, they appealed to a Muslim ruler, King Abdulaziz, and he responded generously. Today, however, the situation is such that a more informed, continued appraisal of the life of Muslims in socialist countries is required. When we are faced, as we were during the last war, by the deportation of great numbers of Muslim peoples, the destruction of their physical, cultural and intellectual, not to mention religious, life, we cannot remain idle onlookers, limiting ourselves to emotional expressions of sympathy alone. It is true that we must work within certain parameters: when Ayesha Seytmuratova, the Crimean Tatar leader, appealed to representatives of Muslim countries for their help in raising the issue of her people's wrongful deportation and prolonged exile, the unanimous response was that the matter, though entirely worthy of support, was too much of an embarrassment and must, therefore, be avoided. This is a fact: government policies cannot be changed overnight. If we wish to achieve anything it must be done slowly and by creating a suitable climate of opinion. Our most important weapon is knowledge: we must seek to collect and disseminate information; to train specialists who are able to observe and

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evaluate the situation; to make proper use of cultural agreements that exist, by insisting on sending our share of material to the USSR, instead of meekly receiving a one-way flood of propoganda. The Soviet Muslims today know very little about Islam: the majority know nothing of its precepts, are unable to read the Koran and cannot even perform the prescribed prayer. Yet their perception of themselves as Muslims is as strong as ever and we, who are able to practice our religion freely, owe it to them to give them the support they so desperately need. Steps have been taken. The Islamic Council was the first Muslim organisation to raise its voice in the international forum on behalf of Soviet Muslims. It presented a memorandum to the recent conference in Madrid. It is publicising their plight in every way possible, writing articles about them, introducing the subject at conferences. There is much to be done, but at least a start has been made.

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